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Law-school grads balking at low-pay jobs

Enormous college loans behind legal-aid snub

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Law school graduates paying back \$80,000 and more in college loans are reluctant to seek low-paying jobs representing the poor, legal experts say.

Students leaving law schools earn annual salaries as low as \$25,000 working for government public-service organizations, while those who land jobs with top-ranked law firms make \$80,000 a year or more.

Some graduates who take jobs with Colorado Legal Services, which handles housing and other civil disputes for the poor, pay up to \$800 a month on student loans, said Jonathan Asher, executive director. The agency pays newly graduated lawyers \$31,736 a year in Denver and \$24,911 elsewhere in the state.

Top firms in Denver and elsewhere pay first-year associates \$80,000 to \$125,000 a year.

Galloping tuition payments have reduced the pool of applicants for legal aid and other public service jobs, Asher said.

Nationally, law school tuition doubled between 1991 and 2001, according to the National Association for Law Placement, based in Washington, D.C.

'A significant number of people have said that for them the pressure of student loans eliminates their options and choices,' Asher said.

Sixty-six percent of law students surveyed nationally in 2002 said that debt kept them from considering a job with groups like Colorado Legal Services, said a study by the National Association for Law Placement. And 68 percent of public-interest employers reported difficulty in recruiting attorneys.

In 2001, median private law school tuition was about \$23,000 a year, according to the study.

The average law school graduate carries debt of more than \$84,000. That doesn't include debt racked up on undergraduate work.

It is a source of frustration, said Libby DeBlasio, a University of Denver law student. 'It's kind of a joke among a lot of us who want to do public interest law. We say, 'Yeah, this is what I want to do, but I may have to work in a private firm and be a drone for a while.'

Jennifer Knight, a lawyer with Colorado Legal Services who handles housing and other civil cases for the poor, is paying off roughly \$80,000 in loans. And she received a scholarship that paid half her tuition at Northeastern University's law school in Boston.

Knight, 31, is a Mexican-American who grew up in a low-income housing development. When she was still in high school, she decided she wanted to be a lawyer and work with the poor.

Many of Knight's fellow minority law students also were interested in public service, she said. But most went into private practice.

'A lot of people I went to law school with were fired up about public practice, but they had more debt than I did,' she said.

At the state's largest law school, the University of Denver, tuition climbed from about \$15,000 to \$23,994 during the past 10 years.

By comparison, tuition at the University of Colorado Law School at Boulder is much lower for state residents - \$6,754 a year. Out-of-state residents pay \$21,252.

So far, Asher said, Colorado Legal Services has been able to attract the talent it needs.

The state Public Defender's office - where new lawyers make \$43,536 a year - also continues to attract good candidates, said Frances Smylie Brown, chief deputy.

But in the last several years, the office widened its search for potential hires, reaching outside the state for the first time in its history.

'We don't have a large enough pool of applicants from Denver University and the University of Colorado to fill the number of openings we have each year,' Smylie Brown said. DU has a law-student body of about 1,000, and CU's population is about half that.

Population growth and a corresponding increase in crime are primarily responsible for the dwindling number of local candidates, but interest is also waning, Smylie Brown said.